Predestination versus Free Will: Elphaba's Decline into Wickedness

by Sara Stuehm

Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* creates an adventurous and dark tale about a new protagonist—Elphaba. Throughout the novel, Elphaba is constantly at opposition with herself. She can never make peace with the question of whether her fate has already been predetermined or if she has free will and has been making choices her whole life. Elphaba is less influenced by the nature of her odd state of being—her green skin, razor-sharp baby teeth, and hermaphroditic sexuality—than the negative nurturing that she receives from society. Elphaba has an unfortunate, unsupportive home life, challenging social experiences at Shiz University, and, as an adult, she copes with personal ethics involving Animal rights and the corrupt government of Oz that tries to employ and manipulate her.

As the plot unfolds, the reader's thoughts are provoked by Elphaba's continuous philosophical thoughts and questions against the fact that this story was written over a century ago, therefore sealing the Wicked Witch of the West's infamous death and predestined fate into the pages of the story. Gregory Maguire's novel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, offers an original, yet ostentatious portrayal of L. Frank Baum's children's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Maguire creates a character who is essentially a foil within herself—Elphaba is amiable and mysterious in the beginning of the novel; however, by the end, Elphaba becomes evil and truly embodies the nature of the Wicked Witch of the West due to
the negative influences from society that Elphaba has experienced throughout her life.

Many readers are accustomed to the familiar fairy tale motif of good versus evil. Jason Edwards and Brian Klosa, authors of “The Complexity of Evil in Modern Mythology: The Evolution of the Wicked Witch of the West,” explain in further detail that without evil there is no good. Edwards and Klosa go on to discuss the equal importance of the villain in contrast to the hero. If a villain is described as evil and given commonly sinister characteristics, then the character will certainly become evil (in the eyes of the reader) due to the historical narrative that the author has placed around the character. Many modern texts have challenged this simple good versus evil motif by using the motif as a foundation for the story, and twisting other literary elements. These modern alterations renovate the traditional story and complicate the familiar motif into something less recognizable, but more intriguing to analyze (Edwards and Klosa 33-34). Therefore, this contemporary technique creates an ambiguous evil—the very type of evil that Elphaba embodies within Maguire’s novel.

The winding path that leads Elphaba to her unique wickedness begins with her dysfunctional family. Elphaba was born into an isolated and broken family. Her mother, Melena, is a promiscuous wife who abuses substances in order to cope with the disappointment she harbors about her family. Frex, Elphaba’s father, is a traveling Unionist minister who preaches to others about his faith in the Unnamed God; however, Frex does not live by any specific morals, especially none that a reader would expect a religious man to apply to his own life. When Elphaba is still
young, for instance, a man named Turtle Heart arrives at the Thropp’s home in
drought-ridden Munchkinland. Melena, almost immediately, begins having an affair
with Turtle Heart. Frex, much to the reader’s surprise, allows Turtle Heart to stay
and live with Melena and Elphaba while Frex continues to travel and preach. This
precarious home life is just the beginning of Elphaba’s forthcoming issues within
society.

Further, when Frex is home, it is suspected that he also has sexual relations
with Turtle Heart. In one scene, Maguire writes: “Frex held his pipe in his two hands
and watched Turtle Heart speak. Frex was drawn to him; Frex was always drawn to
intensity… pointing to the roundel Turtle Heart had made as a toy for Elphaba, ‘is to
see the future, in blood and rubies’” (Maguire 71-72). Maguire’s description of
Frex’s behavior additionally supports the theory that Frex and Turtle Heart
participated in homosexual relations. The pipe that Frex is holding so dearly could
symbolize the male reproductive organ, while Frex’s intense and unyielding gaze
upon Turtle Heart also shows Frex’s underlying feelings of passion and lust towards
the mysterious man.

Frex allows his infatuation with Turtle Heart to diminish his efforts as a
father and as a husband. Frex does not give Elphaba the love or support she needs
as a child, partially because she is not a “normal” human and also because he is too
concerned about fulfilling his own sexual satisfactions. As a result of incorporating
Turtle Heart as a “new member of the family,” this negatively impacts Elphaba
further because she now has two father figures in her life, neither of which is stable
nor helpful during Elphaba’s adolescent development.
In the beginning of Elphaba's life, Nanny also comes to stay with the Thropp family. Nanny seems to be the only person who is not repulsed by Elphaba’s odd green skin, prematurely sharp teeth, or her questionable gender. Instead, Nanny begins managing the family, prying the truth from Melena about her bad habits, and caring for the small green girl to the best of her ability. Compared to Melena, Nanny becomes a much more stable mother figure for Elphaba. Nanny does not reject Elphaba for her differences or treat Elphaba like the outcast of the family—like her parents do. Eventually, Nanny insists on integrating Elphaba socially. Nanny declares, "We must take Elphie to Rush Margins and find some small children for her to play with" (Maguire 61). This seemingly absurd act is against Melena’s “motherly judgment,” and she hesitantly replies, “But you have to be jesting! How cruel to, to inflict the outside world on her! A green child will be an open invitation for scorn and abuse. And children are wickeder than adults; they have no sense of restraint. We might as well go throw her in the lake she’s so terrified of” (Maguire 61). Nanny does not withdraw her argument, and Melena is forced to comply—Elphaba joins the playgroup, thus beginning her life of ridicule and social discomfort. Nanny tries to do what is best for Elphaba by introducing her to other children her age, but by pushing Elphaba out into the world, Nanny is also exposing Elphaba to more hardship and discrimination. Therefore, society, in addition to her family, treats Elphaba like an outcast, someone who is inferior to other humans, thus beginning the demise of Elphaba in her predestined path towards wickedness.

Moreover, Christopher Roman, author of “The Wicked Witch of the West Terrorist? Rewriting Evil in Gregory Maguire's Wicked," discusses many of the
elements that hinder Elphaba while she is growing up. First, he mentions religion and the divisions that were present within the Thropp household. Frex was a Unionist minister who favored his second daughter, Nessarose, and her growing faith for the same religion. Frex also participates in the new Pleasure faith, no matter how much he claims to dislike the connotations that surround it. This is due to Frex’s implied relations with Turtle Heart, and the fact that Frex subconsciously allows his wife to pursue her affair with Turtle Heart as well. On the other hand, Nanny is partial to Lurlinism and Lurline’s creation story of Oz, whereas Melena and Elphaba are not partial to any specific religion (212). Therefore, this establishes the foundation for Elphaba’s cynical view of society and the citizens who live blindly within it.

Furthermore, as interpreted by Roman, Elphaba rejects the Unionist view of religion by saying, “the Unionists have no real idea where evil resides; rather, every evil thing is a sign of the absence of the deity” (212). This realization explains Elphaba’s opinion of religion and society’s misinterpretation of evil, but it also defines Elphaba as evil in the eyes of religion because she has already dismissed the idea of embracing a “higher power.” Elphaba’s refusal to participate in a religious faith is yet another reason that society treats Elphaba like an outcast. She is not able to identify with a large group from any community; instead, Elphaba redirects her concerns towards Animal rights and governmental control within Oz. These decisions segregate Elphaba from the other citizens of Oz, whether it is religion or government politics, Elphaba makes it very apparent that she does not want to conform to the rest of society. As a result, the people of Oz see Elphaba a source of
evil because she does not believe in a deity and rebels against the authority of the
government. Due to Elphaba’s actions and society’s reaction, the stigma of evil is
being thrust more forcefully upon Elphaba’s personality.

Towards the middle of Maguire’s novel, Elphaba attends school at Shiz
University. At first Elphaba is hesitant to make friends or even open up to any of the
other girls. Her roommate, Galinda, is a girl whom Elphaba envies, but more
importantly, Elphaba wants to see Galinda’s intelligence emerge. Galinda hides her
substantive thoughts behind her beauty and “high” social status, of which she is also
self-conscious. Elphaba is able to see through Galinda’s act, but Galinda is also able
to shake Elphaba’s confidence. Regardless of their differences, Elphaba and Galinda
build a relationship. However, Galinda tries to hide this relationship from other
students at Shiz, and overtly treats Elphaba as if she is inferior compared to the
other girls. Even in their friendship, Galinda still considers Elphaba to be an outcast
and less socially acceptable. Consequently, Elphaba does not deter this label;
instead, she seems content and acts as if she does not need much companionship.
Through these actions and challenges at Shiz, Elphaba begins accepting her role as
an outcast in society and laying the foundation for her predestined downfall into
wickedness.

One day Elphaba and Galinda are summoned by Madame Morrible to
perform a suspicious duty. Madame Morrible also requests the help of Nessarose,
Elphaba’s favored sister. Madame Morrible asks the three women to assist in
completing a task for the Wizard of Oz. Madame Morrible puts a spell on the three
women in hope that their involvement will help the Wizard consolidate his power
Elphaba and Galinda eventually travel to the Emerald City to visit the Wizard. The Wizard demands, “...tell me why she [Madame Morrible] sent you here,” to which Elphaba responds, “She didn’t.” The Wizard shrieks, “Do you even know the meaning of the word pawn?” Elphaba replies, “Do you know what resistance means?” and the Wizard only laughs instead of killing them on the spot (Maguire 225). This audacious exchange between Elphaba and the Wizard not only shows Elphaba’s growing confidence against authority, but also the foil within her character. Elphaba is resisting the collective fear of the Wizard and is not succumbing to the roles that society is trying to force upon her—her “duty” to the Wizard, Madame Morrible, the corrupt government, or the traditional role of the Wicked Witch of the West.

As Elphaba’s work advocating for Animal rights and her involvement in the underground government organization progresses, the reader is not given much detail about Elphaba’s actions or intentions behind her work. Fiyero, Elphaba’s lover at the time, asks what her true motivation is behind all her efforts. Elphaba responds, “to kill the Wizard” (Maguire 265). According to Roman, this single-minded purpose is the source of Elphaba’s wickedness and even harshly categorizes her as a terrorist. However, the critical reader must question Elphaba’s intentions and wonder—What is the source of Elphaba’s wickedness? At this point in her life, Elphaba has made friends at school, created a passionate relationship with a man, and fought for Animal rights against an unethical government that is losing control of its people. Some readers could argue that Elphaba is simply trying to find justice in her corrupt life. Perhaps she is trying to stand up for herself against Madame
Morrible’s spell and the malevolent plan the Wizard is trying to execute with Elphaba’s help, but without her complete understanding. Elphaba’s aversion and disgust towards the government has grown so deep that she says to Fiyero, “I never use the word humanist or humanitarian, as it seems to me that to be human is to be capable of the most heinous crimes in nature” (Maguire 240). In opposition, Elphaba’s passion for Animals and her love for hybrids have grown immensely. Not only can Elphaba relate to Animals because they are hybrids of two worlds, like her, but she can also use the Animals rights avocation as a further reason to rebel against the government and society because she is also treated as an outcast. Like the Animals, Elphaba is labeled as weird, different, green, and she has no interest in being labeled as human. At this point in the story, Elphaba has rejected the sense of community and faith that society offers—she does not have any interest in becoming a “normal” member of Oz. However, as an ironic result, she is still negatively influenced by society and its collective aversion from her obvious differences. Readers could infer that Elphaba is earning her inevitable label as the Witch of the West as she continues to reject the seemingly toxic qualities of Oz and infringes upon wickedness.

However, readers could also question the depth of Elphaba’s wickedness in her hesitation to kill Madame Morrible. Elphaba plans to kill Madame Morrible in public, but Elphaba is not able to complete the deed because a group of school children block the target—Madame Morrible—when she is standing in the street. The innocent lives of the school children prevent Elphaba from carrying out her fatal deed. Some readers may agree that if Elphaba was truly wicked, then the death of
innocent people would not have bothered or stopped her from executing her lethal plan. Although, as readers, we also know that Elphaba’s character is not that simple or superficial. Elphaba aborted her plan that day; some could suggest that Elphaba was attempting to act like hero, while others could explain that fate or predestination had not allowed Elphaba to kill Madame Morrible that day. Either way, Elphaba returned to visit Madame Morrible. Elphaba’s apparent need to feel the satisfaction of revenge could certainly be a response to Madame Morrible’s coldhearted treatment of Elphaba when she was a student at Shiz. To Elphaba’s serious disappointment, Madame Morrible was already dead by the time Elphaba arrived; however, that did not stop Elphaba from violently beating Madame Morrible’s dead corpse with a trophy. After Elphaba commits this brutally evil act, she tells her friends that she was responsible for Madame Morrible’s death, and that she traveled to Shiz University specifically to kill Madame Morrible. The reader starts to seriously question Elphaba’s psychological stability, and this string of violent and manipulative actions is the blatant beginning of Elphaba’s change in personality. Now, she is clearly beginning to embody the nature and personality of the Wicked Witch of the West.

At this pivotal point in the novel, Elphaba is consumed by certain desires that she did not previously feel were necessary. Elphaba is overcome by her thirst to kill Madame Morrible and brag about it to others, her longing to define her identity—consciously and socially—and later, her obsession with Nessarose’s sparkly shoes. Alissa Burger, author of, “The Wicked and Wonderful Witches: Narrative and Gender Negotiations from The Wizard of Oz to Wicked” says, “the Wicked Witch of the West
is dangerous because she is a woman who wants... to be a woman who wants is to be a woman who can only want” (Burger 127). This quote not only highlights Elphaba’s growing obsessions and unfulfilled desires, but it also lays a foundation for Elphaba’s increasingly unstable psyche to decline into wickedness.

However, Jessica Zebrine Gray, author of “From Witch to Wicked: A Mutable and Transformational Sign,” discusses the sequence of Elphaba’s life and specific instances that most likely influenced Elphaba’s demise. Gray explains that Elphaba was not necessarily evil because of the selfish needs that manifested after she left Shiz University and began working undercover for a government organization. Instead Elphaba becomes a sort of recluse due to many personal losses—by this time, her parents, Fiyero, and Nessarose have all died (172). Elphaba’s questionable sanity could definitely be due to the deaths that Elphaba has experienced in her life. In addition to, Elphaba’s prolonged inability to understand herself completely, her continued marginality, and lack of conformity within society.

Gray’s analysis opposes Burger’s description of Elphaba’s wickedness because Gray focuses more on Elphaba’s emotions and sentimentalities, as opposed to her stereotypical selfish desires that have been the Wicked Witch’s motivation in past interpretations of this story. Regardless of Elphaba’s motivation, though, she is still dangerous, and she still accepts the label and identity of the Wicked Witch of the West. Society pushes this label into Elphaba’s life, and Elphaba attempts to resist. Elphaba is not inherently evil, but she still embodies the wickedness of the Witch of the West because of the negative influences that society has pressed upon her, and overall, fulfilled the predestination of her character within this familiar story.
Gregory Maguire’s novel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, is a very mature rendition of the L. Frank Baum’s children’s book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In Maguire’s overtly dark, sexual, and political tale neither the Wizard nor Oz are wonderful. Conversely, Oz is corrupt and the Wizard is Oz’s crooked leader. Maguire twists the focus of the story from its common protagonist, Dorothy, and instead he describes in great detail Elphaba—the character who is a foil within herself. Elphaba was born into a dysfunctional family who treated Elphaba as an outcast—someone that their other daughter, Nessarose, could easily surpass. This stigma followed Elphaba throughout her time at Shiz University, and she continued to live a life filled with discrimination and social discomfort. As Elphaba’s life evolved beyond Shiz, she segregated herself further from society, rebelled against the government, and became a recluse as a result of her gradually acquired, yet sinister obsessions. Ultimately, due to the predestined fate of Elphaba’s character in the original presentation of this story, as well as the extremely negative influences that society has upon Elphaba, she is eventually driven to become the Wicked Witch of the West.
Works Cited


